

The late Chou En-lai was once invited to speculate on how the course of history would have been altered if, say, Nikita Khrushchev had been assassinated instead of John F. Kennedy. Chou's austere version of Marxism made him dubious about the importance of things like sheer accidents and mere individuals.

But in this instance he was prepared to allow that things might have been different. How different? "Well," said the mandarin Stalinist with complete gravity, "I hardly think that Aristotle Onassis would have married Mrs. Khrushchev."

Historical revisionism is in the air these days. Nothing you thought you knew turns out to be right. The old texts and the old reliable facts are under attack. So are the conventional heroes. Even the concept of historical objectivity is challenged by books such as Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*, which questions the very idea that we can acquire neutral, value-free knowledge of the past.

But people need their myths, their legends, and their heroes, and you can expect to run into trouble if you assert, as has been argued in various recent books, that, say:

—J.F.K. was a phony and a plagiarist with a clinging case of the clap;

—Winston Churchill was a drink-sodden egomaniac who led his nation to decline and disaster;

—Franklin Roosevelt had guilty knowledge in advance of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor;

—there were no gas chambers in Nazi concentration camps.

Skipping heartlessly through this minefield, one realizes that more is at stake than reputation. People cleave to their core beliefs and anchoring facts, and are hurt and shocked by challenges to them. Where would we all be without Camelot or the New Frontier or "Ask not"? What would become of us if we were deprived of noble rhetoric about Munich and Dunkirk and that "date which will live in



Roosevelt:
A traitor?

WHOSE HISTORY IS IT?



Churchill:
An incompetent drunk?

John Charmley
revised Winston Churchill;
Nigel Hamilton
took on the J.F.K. myth.
Like historians before them,
they found the perils
and rewards
of casting a fresh eye on
sacred beliefs

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

infamy"? George Orwell memorably evoked the vertiginous sensation that is experienced when the historical record is forcibly revised: "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." And yet the past, though of its nature alterable, never had been altered. . . . All that was needed was an unending series of victories over your own memory." George Washington never owned up to

cutting down that cherry tree, because there was no tree and he didn't cut it down anyway. To say this will offend some people but not others. But try to take away their Churchill, or tell them that black Africans were sold into slavery by other black Africans, or challenge anything to do with the casualties of war, and see your mailbag swell.

Churchill makes a good starting point, because he has near-universal name recognition, as we say in the trade, and near-unanimous approval ratings. His titanic standing depends principally on a set of rotundly defiant speeches made in the years 1940 and 1941,

when he staked everything on resistance to Hitler. Now, in his book *Churchill: The End of Glory*, the British historian John Charmley has proposed that May 1940 would have been the ideal month for Churchill and Hitler to make a gentleman's agreement. We'd all have been better off: German rule in Europe would have been moderated; the British Empire would have survived, and the Communists confined to the wastes of Russia; and Britain would not now be a flyblown banana republic.

What could be more reasonable? After all, even Churchill's staunchest admirers admit that he was doltishly wrong on everything *else* in his political career. So why shouldn't he have been a blundering oaf on this occasion as well? Yet for innumerable readers and reviewers on both sides of the Atlantic (Arthur Schlesinger prominent among them) the iconic status of Churchill is

an indispensable "fact" of life. If it can be shown that he was a vain old fool, then their world would turn upside down. Yet *The Times* of London, which headlined Churchill's (Continued on page 117)



Hitler:
Didn't know?



Kennedy:
A plagiarist and
a phony?

(Continued from page 110) death in 1965 by calling him "The Greatest Englishman of His Time," 28 years later devoted an editorial to John Charmley and said of his book that it "introduced doubt to a field of history hitherto dominated by certainty and clubbability. In this sense, revisionism is the friend of skepticism, the enemy of cant."

Other reactions to the book were of the sort that you get from those who discover, later in life, that their own parents wanted to abort them. It's as if Charmley had hired a time machine in which to travel back and assassinate the national grandparents. "Questioning the ancestral gods of any nation," as he writes, "has never been an enterprise rewarded by anything save calumny."

In his judgment, Churchill's rash and needless picking of a fight with Hitler (while Churchill was often frolicking in a cataract of booze, just as Berlin radio used to claim) led to Eastern Europe's being gifted to Stalin (half true) and the British Empire's being mortgaged to Washington (quite true, as the Churchill-Roosevelt correspondence had shown) and the rise of the British Labour Party (one-tenth true). Yet Charmley describes himself as a "radical-right Thatcherite." And if history means anything at all, it means that you can't have Thatcher without Churchill. The Lady herself gets quite lachrymose at the mention of his name, and her memoirs are full of Churchilliana. Indeed, in her attempt to install a patriotic curriculum in English schools, she upbraided those elements in the teaching and historical professions who "gnaw away at our national self-respect, re-writing British history as centuries of unrelieved gloom, oppression and failure—as days of hopelessness, not days of hope."

A more devastating book is James Rusbridger's *Betrayal at Pearl Harbor*, published in 1991, which provided a mass of evidence to show that Churchill had known of the impending Japanese assault and kept it to himself because he yearned for Roosevelt's entry into the war. Rusbridger was rudely trashed in respectable organs, even though he had had the exclusive cooperation of Eric Nave, the Australian code breaker who had access to the secret. But then, Rusbridger was a double disappointment: First, he offended the Establishment monopoly of historians who have "access" to things like code-breaking archives. Second, he gravely upset those who had striven for years to prove that

it was *Roosevelt* who had known all along. But at least he was producing facts and papers rather than induction and speculation. Charmley may have made people take an overdue second look at Churchill, but he doesn't have a prayer of proving that Hitler would have broken the rule of a lifetime and honored a pact with Churchill, even if he had made one.

The most sinister of the current revisionist arguments—if indeed it is an argument at all—concerns the reality of the Holocaust. Terrific alarm broke out in the American Jewish community last spring when a Roper Organization poll (commissioned by the American Jewish Committee) found 22 percent of adults agreeing that "it seems possible"

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that "Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened." You could probably get 22 percent of people to say that any damned thing "seems possible" (this is America, where anything is), but there were some who believed that the large doubt recorded by the poll was evidence that the "deniers" and "revisionists" had been at work. The headquarters of Holocaust denial is the Institute for Historical Review in California, which publishes a regular update on the "non-event" of the Final Solution. It is the target of a recent book by Deborah Lipstadt, a professor at Emory University in Atlanta, who wrote *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* as a reply to the proliferation of "denial" on call-in shows, university campuses, and elsewhere—including more recently a leaflet campaign at the national Holocaust Memorial Museum, newly opened in Washington.

Even though Deborah Lipstadt refuses to engage in direct exchanges with Holocaust deniers, because she believes that they are trying to rehabilitate the Nazis, she agreed to help me in an experiment. I contacted the Institute for Historical Review and asked them to send me their best shot. I then ran it by

Professor Lipstadt and by Professor Christopher Browning, of Pacific Lutheran University, who is the author of *Ordinary Men*, a haunting account of one Nazi extermination squad in wartime Poland. The revisionists sent me an article by a Frenchman named Robert Faurisson, which claimed that Rudolf Höss, one of the commandants of Auschwitz, had been tortured by the British into confessing to a fantastic and unbelievable number of murders. "I declare herewith under oath that in the years 1941 to 1943, during my tenure in office as commandant of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, 2 million Jews were put to death by gassing and a 1/2 million by other means." This statement, specially mounted and reproduced, is an important exhibit at the Holocaust Memorial.

I then got in touch with Lipstadt and Browning for their responses, which were surprising: "Höss was always a very weak and confused witness," said Browning, who has been an expert witness at trials involving Auschwitz. "The revisionists use him all the

time for this reason, in order to try and discredit the memory of Auschwitz as a whole." And Professor Lipstadt directed me to page 188 of her book, which is quite a page. It says that the stories about the Nazis making Jews into soap are entirely untrue, and it also says that while the memorial stone at Auschwitz itself lists the number of victims—Jews and non-Jews—at 4 million, the truer figure is somewhere between 1.5 and 2 million. Since Höss was the commandant of the place for only part of its existence, this means that—according to the *counter-revisionists*—an important piece of evidence in the Holocaust Memorial is not reliable. A vertiginous sensation if you like.

"It's the same with the soap story," said Lipstadt. "I get protests from survivors, saying that I shouldn't admit it's not true, because it gives ammunition to the enemy. But I'm only interested in getting at the truth." An old-fashioned concept.

These ironies cut both ways. The leading revisionist historian of the Holocaust is David Irving, who is the star of the institute in California and author of his own anti-Churchill text. Self-

described as a "mild Fascist," which I would say is putting it mildly, he has publicly endorsed Adolf Eichmann's original scheme to deport all the Jews of Europe to the island of Madagascar. Irving has been making a reasonably good living these many years, not by denying the Holocaust but by claiming that it all took place without the knowledge or consent of the *Führer*. He has challenged other archivists to come up with an extermination order signed by Hitler. Having flourished in this way, Irving was suddenly handed Eichmann's memoirs in Buenos Aires in 1991. He pronounced them genuine, but was then brought up short by the disclosure in the said memoirs that Eichmann believed there *was* a direct order. "Food for thought" was Irving's take on that, followed by the butter-wouldn't-melt-in-his-mouth admission that he would "have to revise" his previous thesis. He has since gotten as far as saying that Eichmann's confession doesn't count because his memoirs were written after 1945 and therefore do not constitute a specifically wartime document. Oh well, that's all right then. By the by, at a recent revisionist conference, Irving and Faurisson had a public disagreement on whether there had been any mass extermination of the European Jews at all, with Irving saying that it looked rather as if there had been. So even on the wilder shores, it remains true that to be a revisionist incurs the risk of being revised.

This all bears on the great American textbook debate, with every classroom and publisher involved in the scrutiny of texts. Who ever said that Americans don't care about history? In the test case brought by fundamentalist parents in Hawkins County, Tennessee, in 1983, which has become the classic of the genre, one crucial objection was to the inclusion in a book for seventh-graders of Benjamin Franklin's epitaph for himself, which runs, as you will all remember from your own studies:

The Body of B. Franklin, Printer; Like the Cover of an old Book, Its Contents torn out, And stript of its Lettering and Gilding, Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be wholly lost: For it will, as he believ'd, appear once more, In a new & more perfect Edition, Revised and Corrected By the Author.

You may find that use of the word "revised" to be apt, but the Christian

plaintiffs did not. It would give impressionable young minds, they argued, the errant notion that old Ben Franklin was a Hindu. And people believe that textbooks these days are censored only by the multicultural.

At a recent conference at the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford, Connecticut, which concerned among other things the long history of efforts to ban *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for everything from indecency to atheism, from race mixing to "insensitivity," I had the chance to interview John Wallace, a black campaigner from Chicago who says that *Huck* is (and I quote from his leaflet) "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written." Mr. Wallace claims to have been badly upset as a child by having the book read aloud in

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class and hearing the word "nigger" from a teacher's lips, and has been up and down the land ever since seeking to have the book withdrawn from schools. He has even published his own expurgated edition, with all "offensive" words and phrases removed. As fashion has evolved, Mr. Wallace has kept pace. In the latest edition of his anti-*Huck* leaflet, the accusation that teaching the book "amounts to racial harassment and child abuse" has been added in pen to the printed text. The life of a literary revisionist, too, is one of constant updating. (Incidentally, far from being P.C., Wallace is an admirer of Jesse Helms, Jerry Falwell, and Rush Limbaugh.)

But if you really want to find out what trouble is, try taking on the myth of the Kennedy dynasty. Such was the fate of Nigel Hamilton, an acclaimed and garlanded biographer who decided to have a second look at the J.F.K. legend. (So far has the wheel spun these days that Hamilton is the John F. Kennedy Scholar at the McCormack Institute of the University of Massachusetts.) Upon arrival in Massachusetts, to begin work at the Kennedy Library, Hamilton ran smack into the twin buffers of history as property and history as unassailable myth.

"I never began it as a work of revisionism," Hamilton told me about his book *JFK: Reckless Youth*. "But the existing work by Ted Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger had been written in a cocoon of sentiment, and I thought a new generation required a fresh look."

Alas for Professor Hamilton: he was to find that the idea of passing torches to new generations was one that began and ended with the Kennedys. They clung to it like grim death. "On my first day at the Kennedy Library I was told, They'll lead you a dance—you may as well pack your bags." By dint of incredible persistence Hamilton extracted more than 500 letters that the archivists had been sitting on, but it took him five years instead of the anticipated three.

Even before publication, Hamilton says, he felt the weight of the authorized version. A private letter from him to his publisher was intercepted in the Kennedy Library. A Kennedy-family lawyer materialized, say-

ing that Hamilton's research would be harder to conduct if he mentioned J.F.K.'s treatment for gonorrhea. Like Churchill, J.F.K. was very unwell for much of his time in office, but the story of his Addison's disease, for example, was successfully kept out of the 60s hagiographies. An op-ed piece was written by somebody for *The New York Times*, and signed by four Kennedy siblings, excoriating Hamilton. A particular cause for complaint was his treatment of Rose Kennedy. "The fact is that she's *non compos mentis*," says Hamilton. "So she can't possibly be hurt by what I write. But she's also the Queen Mother of the clan, because she stepped in to fill the breach after Jackie went off to marry Onassis."

Which is where we came in, so I leave the last word to Hamilton. "William Manchester was taken to court by Jackie Kennedy for publishing things that she had actually told him. Now William Manchester is threatening to sue Joe McGinniss for plagiarism. What was once considered revisionism is now considered biblical. And the revisionist endeavor is something that every generation *must* embark upon, whether it's the Holocaust or any other subject." To this generation has fallen the misfortune of living in a time when everything is up for revision. □